

## **A Cook in the Kitchen**

**Louisa Swann**

"I'd like to report a murder," Phyllis P. Carlson said. "And I'm telling you right now – the butler didn't do it."

Phyllis stared out across the Pacific Ocean and tapped her right toe against the sand-colored flagstone. An awkward silence stretched across the phone line. She frowned. "Do you need an aural prosthesis or something? I said . . ."

"Yes, ma'am. I heard you." The dispatcher was young, male, and Phyllis decided, new on the job. "You wish to report a murder."

"That's correct."

"Where is the victim now?"

A breeze caressed Phyllis's cheek – a spring zephyr that normally would have carried the delicate perfume of just-bloomed roses had been infused with an overwhelming stench. What she smelled now reminded her of the kitchen down at St. Francis's. Not the soup. The fetid breath of a man who'd been living on and under the streets all his life. Like he was rotting from the inside out.

She swallowed hard and pressed her lips together until her chin quivered. Losing one's breakfast over something as insignificant as a smell, however dreadful that smell, was simply not done. She turned away from the gory mess not ten feet away and put her hand over the phone's mouthpiece.

"Can you find a blanket to cover her?" she whispered to the man standing beside her. His auburn hair glistened in the sun as he dipped his head in a nod and disappeared into the house.

"Where is the victim, ma'am?" The dispatcher repeated the question.

"She's in front of my house. On my veranda. I haven't moved her," Phyllis said in a rush. She'd always taken pride in her home. Built on the highest point in Pacific Heights, the house overlooked the Golden Gate Bridge – an antique piece of architecture that brought tourists flocking from all over the world just for a stroll. Now that home had been changed in a way no architect could have predicted.

"That's good, ma'am. Do you know the victim's name?"

"Her full name is Lotus Blossom Mimosa, but I just call her Mimi. She's been my constant companion for the past fifteen years."

"Why do you suspect the victim has been murdered?"

"My veranda is covered in blood." Phyllis's voice broke and she had to swallow twice before continuing. "The poor thing must have dragged herself up the stairs trying to get to me."

The dispatcher cleared his throat. The police department appeared to be having as much trouble as everyone else finding good help, Phyllis decided. It was time to bring this question-and-answer session to a close and get on with finding the murderer.

"What is your name, young man?"

"Freddie, ma'am," the dispatcher said.

"Well, Freddie. The detectives will have to present proper identification to the security guards at the gate, but I warn you, young man, if those detectives do not arrive within the next ten minutes, I will call your supervisor directly." She smothered an impatient sigh.

"Just one more question," the dispatcher seemed to be having trouble with the next sentence. "How do you know the butler didn't do it?"

"James has been employed with me for over eight years now. He is not the kind of man to . . ." Again her voice betrayed her. Phyllis swallowed hard and tried a different tack. "I'm a well-read woman, Freddie. Everyone knows the butler is the first suspect investigated by law enforcement officers. I'm just trying to save a little time."

"Yes, ma'am," Freddie said. Phyllis noted the change in his voice with some satisfaction. She nodded at James as he stepped through the doorway, blanket in hand.

"They're on their way." Phyllis handed her cell phone to James with a shudder. Cell phones were a necessity in today's world, but she abhorred feeling tied to a machine. Normally, she used the antique push button phone on her desk. This morning that was out of the question – she couldn't leave Mimi all alone on the veranda.

"I would still suggest you call the Humane Society," James said. The deep rich tenor of his voice sent a thrill through Phyllis's old bones. She steadied herself on her feet and resisted the urge to lean on James's strong arm. Old as her bones were getting, they were still her bones, and she'd keep using them until they finally gave out.

"I'm sure the police can handle this, but I'll give Larry Watkins a call." Phyllis patted her butler's arm. Wouldn't hurt to humor the poor man. Besides, she'd given the Humane Society

countless donations over the years. Maybe the Society's director could use his not-inconsiderable influence to light a flame beneath the metaphorical derriere of the local law enforcement agency.

"Have I given you a bonus lately?" Phyllis asked.

"Yes, ma'am. Two days ago."

Phyllis frowned, trying to remember the circumstances and failing. "Well," she said, her face brightening. "Remind me to give you another bonus next week."

"Yes, ma'am." From the sound of his beautiful voice, James wouldn't be reminding her anytime soon. Phyllis made a mental note to make a written note to give him that bonus.

That was another thing she liked about James. Not only did he take care of the household management, he was forever reminding her to not be so free with her finances. James was always there when she needed him. She'd rewarded his loyalty and dedication by making him the primary beneficiary of her will. Edward wouldn't be happy when he found out, but there was no way on this earth she was going to let what was left of the Carlson fortune be squandered away on mechanical contrivances.

Phyllis forgot the will and the bonus as James stepped out on the flagstone. Her stomach twisted into a painful knot as he spread the dark gray blanket over the blood-soaked body of her beloved Pekinese.

"Are you sure, madam, that you should be out here?" James asked, his brow furrowed in concern.

She clenched her teeth and nodded. "I am a mother, James," she said. "Edward used to have enough accidents for three children. Have I told you about the time he fell off the swing and practically split his head open?"

James nodded, but Phyllis continued, anything to turn the subject away from Mimi's pathetic little body. "There was blood all over everywhere and I was sure Edward Junior was dead. How anyone could lose that much blood and survive was beyond all comprehension. But he looked up at me with those crystal blue eyes of his and started laughing."

It wouldn't be the same with Mimi. Phyllis knelt down, heedless of the sticky puddle oozing around the blanket's edge, and laid a hand on her best friend. Life was so tender, so precious. It really burned her buns to see how callously some people treated that life.

James claimed Mimi must have met with some kind of accident, perhaps been hit by a car,

but Phyllis knew he was just trying to console her. Mimi had been trained by Edward Senior to never stray beyond the rose bushes at the foot of the circular drive. She had no reason to roam beyond the estate's boundaries.

San Francisco had changed drastically since Phyllis was a young girl growing up in the city. In spite of all the codes and regulations, man couldn't stop Mother Nature when she got into one of her foul moods. The earthquake of 2046 had leveled houses more than two centuries old including the Carlson home.

Her husband had dealt with the destruction in his normal inimitable way – he had bought out their neighbors on both sides, cleaned up the debris and joined the lots together. The estate now claimed fifteen full acres, providing a solitude rarely found in this city by the bay.

The original home had been modeled after an old Sussex farmhouse, given character by the addition of Italianate columns and a wide Spanish tile roof covering the flagstone veranda. In her husband's words, it had taken "a truckload of money and twice as much time" to restore the home to its pre-earthquake grandeur.

Phyllis had hired the best landscape architect in the city and worked side by side with him to turn the damaged land into a leafy green paradise. Her pride and joy was the rose garden out front. The bushes were kept trimmed low so they didn't obstruct the view, but Phyllis found nothing more relaxing than sitting on her veranda with the city at her feet watching the sun sink into the Pacific, the air saturated with rose perfume.

She'd never be able to watch the sun set again without remembering Mimi's blood.

No. Mimi was murdered, Phyllis was certain of it. Why and by whom was a mystery she was determined to solve.